

Cross-cultural issues in vocation and formation ministry

by Divine Word Missionaries Adam MacDonald, Son Van Nguyen, Carlos Paniagua, Ed Peklo, Dennis Newton, and Paul Wang

A strange introduction

In 1975 when Joseph Tri Van Vu first arrived as a student at our college seminary in Iowa, everyone was in the dining room for the Halloween party. He thought it strange that everyone was in costume, but the real shock came when candidates, faculty with their children, and members of the SVD community all pitched in to move tables aside for the dance. This didn't *look* like a seminary to the newly arrived refugee! Today Joseph Tri is a member of our congregation and dean of students at the college seminary. Now the largest celebration of the school year is Lunar New Year, and yes, after celebrating the Eucharist, and after the formal banquet, everyone pitches in to prepare the dance floor.

At our community celebration of Lunar New Year, you will certainly listen to and sing songs in Vietnamese and Chinese, but you'll also sing in English and Spanish; egg rolls and fried rice will be prepared by the Iowa women on the kitchen staff; young women in long, traditional Vietnamese dresses will be

seen doing country line dancing. On occasions such as Lunar New Year, we are at our best — joyous and enthused by the tremendous diversity and richness we find and celebrate among ourselves.

The invitation by *Horizon's* editorial board to write an article on cross-cultural issues in vocation ministry challenged us to reflect on a theme which has become very prominent in almost every aspect of American society in general.

American society has become more diverse and multicultural. The world is shrinking. Any mall's food court serves foods from all over the world; events in South Africa receive as much air time on CNN as floods in the U.S. Midwest; multiculturalism is a buzz word in education; and almost every U.S. city faces tensions from interaction between different groups of people.

International living is a special part of our Society's charism. Our *Constitutions* challenge us to "witness to the universality of

the church and the unity of all people through the international character of our Society." Diverse, multi-cultural communities within our international Society are the norm, except in special circumstances. For example, ten men formed our pre-novitiate group this year. There were four Vietnamese Americans, two Mexicans, a Ugandan, a Ghanaian, a Euro-American, and an African American. Even though international living has always been one of our core characteristics, it has received more attention in recent years as the response to our vocation initiatives and transfers among our provinces around the world brought more and more diversity to our formation communities.

The process of writing this article on multicultural issues in religious life has been an exciting, although somewhat intimidating, project. We certainly do not have all the answers, and we soon discovered when we began discussing the article that we were not even aware of all the questions. We do, however, have some experiences to share, probably a fair mix of successes and failures.

The invitation

Our recruiters and formators look for potential candidates who are energized and enthused by our multicultural living and international charism. Some prospective candidates do not feel comfortable in our communities, or do not feel called to our kinds of ministries. Vocation directors and formators are keyed into looking for indicators of flexibility and ability to adapt. Candidates who do not have these adaptation skills, or the facility and desire to acquire them, will not be successful or happy in our community. We generally do not accept candidates over age 35 because our experience tells us that candidates, especially those who have not had a cross-cultural experience, find adaptation very difficult.

Our Society aggressively recruits new members from any cultural group from which we might expect a favorable response. In this sense we follow our strengths by recruiting most energetically in communities represented by our own membership. In very

practical terms this means we focus much attention on the Vietnamese community and in other communities where we have an apostolic presence, especially in the Hispanic and African-American communities.

Community Response and

Commitment

We have made a substantial commitment of resources to recruiting new members. A team of full-time recruiters is assisted by other members who are willing to commit some time to recruiting. We usually have five or six full-time recruiters in our three U.S. provinces. Our most successful strategy has been involving our members and candidates in recruitment. The team approach often gives us the advantage of assigning a recruiter or contact person who is a member of the candidate's own cultural group.

Direct mail and advertising strategies are designed to give a glimpse of who we are and to solicit an initial response. After the first response by the candidate and some telephone conversations with a recruiter, the recruiter visits the candidate. A candidate who is interested in learning more about us and who seems to meet our basic criteria is invited to visit one of our houses of formation. This visit to one of our formation programs is the most important recruitment tool because these programs mirror who we are as a community.

During the admission process we do not generally use standardized psychological testing. At this point we do not have sufficient confidence in the results of standardized testing for members of ethnic communities, and many of our candidates have not yet mastered English. We rely most heavily on results of interviews by recruiters and other members of the formation staff, on recommendations by persons who know the candidate, and on the record of past academic performance.

Our formation programs are quite diverse and they have changed considerably in the past twenty years, as the needs of our candidates have changed. We believe that as a

community we have been most creative and most successful when we have been driven by the needs of our candidates. In the early 1920's Divine Word Missionaries opened a seminary in Mississippi for African Americans, first in Greenville and later in Bay St. Louis. It was the first seminary to accept African Americans for the priesthood.

In the early 1970s an Hispanic member of our congregation began to raise questions about how we were offering formation to Mexican-American candidates. Was our four-year college program in Iowa meeting their needs? Was there a better model? Is it necessary for some candidates to receive their initial formation in the context of their own culture? The questions were serious enough to consider and eventually begin Casa Guadalupe, a college-level formation program for Mexican Americans in East Los Angeles. As Casa Guadalupe evolved, other Hispanic candidates, not only Mexican Americans, joined the program.

In 1975 when a large group of Vietnamese refugees arrived at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, representatives of the Society of the Divine Word were invited to visit the camp. In a meeting with Vietnamese seminarians we learned from them that English acquisition was their primary need for entrance into religious communities or dioceses in the United States. Within a few months the Society launched an English as a Second Language program at our college in Iowa. Since 1975 we have been blessed with well over one hundred Vietnamese-American candidates, many of whom are now members of our congregation. That first contact in Arkansas changed us.

Within a few years the Society also established Augustine Tolton House of Studies in New Orleans, a program for college-age African-American candidates. Candidates at Tolton House live in a family-style environment and attend college at Xavier University.

The program at Divine Word College in Iowa was also changing. The ESL program was flourishing, not only for Vietnamese

Americans, but for other candidates, as well as members of our congregation from other provinces, who came to us with a need for instruction in English before beginning college or theologate-level studies. The college began requiring a minor in cross-cultural studies, not only because we are a missionary congregation, but because living together as brothers from many cultures requires basic skills and knowledge.

Six years ago we began looking at the academic needs of Brother candidates who were definitely benefiting from the core academic curriculum in cross-cultural studies, but who were experiencing limitations of the program designed primarily for candidates for the priesthood. The College could not realistically offer the range of degree programs which Brother candidates were seeking. As a result, we began offering the first two years of the college curriculum in general education and cross-cultural studies for all our candidates. Brother candidates, however, were offered the opportunity to obtain an Associate of Arts degree in Cross-Cultural Studies in Iowa, then complete their bachelor's degree in Washington, DC where there were many opportunities to major in engineering, health care, art, music, or other fields of study appropriate to the formation of Brothers. Wendelin House, our newest college-level formation program, was born. The motivating factor in this case was not cultural, but academic; however, the topic is raised here to demonstrate the flexibility in designing programs.

In all of these decisions the needs of the candidates was driving the design of formation programs. Recruitment techniques have merely attempted to surface contacts with young men who might be considering religious, missionary life. The formation program, and how we planned to offer formation, has been the key to attracting and motivating young men to consider entrance into our congregation. We have not experienced the success we hoped for in all our programs, and each of them undergoes periodic evaluation and review. The programs in

Los Angeles and New Orleans, both with a fairly long history, have not resulted in a dramatic increase in Hispanic or African-American candidates, yet we remain convinced of the value of this kind of formation for these groups.

Multi-cultural education and formation

Those of us writing this article are most familiar with our very multicultural and diverse college-level program in Iowa because we studied or worked there. We can merely describe what it looks like now and reflect on what we have experienced.

Living in a cross-cultural community requires the willingness to enter into community living with gusto and enthusiasm, but that is not enough. There are specific skills we need to obtain and areas of knowledge we need to learn. Therefore, our academic program requires courses in psychology, anthropology, sociology and missiology. Candidates are required to master English and demonstrate proficiency in one other modern language.

Student dorm life, with all the casual exchanges that normally occur, is a key formation experience in cross-cultural understanding. We also insist that everyone speaks English, except on one evening each week. This helps to ensure that candidates acquire English skills, but it is also a requisite for living together.

Everyone is invited to share knowledge about his culture and to invite others to experience it in a limited way by celebrating "international nights." On Polish night, for example, students from Poland prepare music, food and entertainment from their culture. Once each month we celebrate one of the cultures represented in our community. Our college calendar reflects the various celebrations which are important for us: our Society feasts, Lunar New Year, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Vietnamese martyrs, Thanksgiving, and the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We attempt to celebrate each of these occasions appropriately.

Our formation program is also driven by the needs of our candidates and our charism. Small formation groups encourage sharing and building interpersonal relationships, where barriers in cross-cultural living can be transformed into bridges for understanding each other. Much energy is given to sharing and dialogue within the small groups, and in faith and Bible-sharing.

We have placed more emphasis in recent years on celebrating our diversity and richness liturgically. Whereas at one time we may have attempted this by inviting some cultural groups to prepare music for liturgies, all of us now participate in singing music from many cultures so that all of us can participate. More expressions and deeper expressions of solidarity and identification need to be found and nurtured.

Spiritual directors and formation directors are expected to participate in on-going education and professional updating in areas related to cross-cultural formation. Spiritual directors meet for in-service meetings and for discussion, prayer and Bible-sharing. Certainly spiritual direction for candidates and members from another culture requires exceptional skills in listening and understanding. The experience of prayer is often difficult to describe in one's native tongue, so much more difficult in a second language.

All members of the instructional and formational faculty participate in in-service assemblies which frequently feature input about one of the cultural groups in our community or cross-cultural communication. We have also tried to assemble a team of faculty and formators from various cultures, and many of our faculty and staff have had in-depth experience in living outside their own culture.

We have previously referred to mastering and using English as non-negotiable, but other non-negotiable assumptions are a commitment to communicate and share, and a willingness to change and adapt. Being able to adapt to another culture is, of course, also

a necessity for future missionaries in our congregation.

The programs and emphases we highlighted above are the easiest to describe; other issues are not so readily addressed. Even routine communication is nuanced by culture and can cause misunderstanding. None of us will become experts in every culture we encounter, so we need to discover how we learn from and listen to one other, especially in matters very close to the heart.

Relationship to family is an area of life which is profoundly affected by culture. Many of our candidates have been separated by their refugee experience from parents, brothers and sisters. Others are experiencing, along with their families, the transition to another culture here in the United States. Some of our candidates have needed to leave our religious community because the vow of poverty would not allow them to provide financial assistance to a struggling family. Some have chosen diocesan priesthood for this reason.

How families view their relationship to the new family of religious whom their son has joined may be quite different from what we would ordinarily expect. How do we reach out to families, especially when we are separated by great distances and language? How do we express families' sorrow? How do we express our sorrow when families experience loss? When families are in severe financial crisis, how do we deal with the member of the congregation and the family? What would families ordinarily consider an appropriate response, and how do we determine what our response will be?

The generally egalitarian values of American culture sometimes clash with the more hierarchical and patriarchal view of Church which some of our candidates hold. How flexible are we in this dialogue? When a candidate's family fails to value the decision of their son to profess as a religious Brother instead of studying for the priesthood, how do we support the candidate? Or, how do we deal with a candidate who is choosing

priesthood over Brotherhood because of family pressures? We struggle with these questions.

How does decision-making within a multicultural group differ from the typical way a Euro-American group decides? How do we decide how to decide?

Before our communities became very multicultural, we had a strong emphasis on self-disclosure with direct, often confrontational, communication. Our formation programs now still value self-disclosure and presume that this is key to formation of community, but the timetable for achieving this level of communication is different and the mode of self-disclosure is different.

Attitudes about sexuality and intimacy are certainly impacted by culture. We cannot assume that typical American values, for good or bad, are exhibited in our multicultural communities. Intimacy needs and forms of expression of the Euro-American candidate are quite different from those of the Asian candidate. How do we respect both? How do we help candidates understand and respond to each other's needs and the ways in which they communicate them?

Just the beginning

These are only some of the issues and questions with which we continue to struggle. The issues we face tomorrow may be much different, but that is the point. Multicultural living is full of surprises, always challenging, occasionally frustrating, and always changing. The experiences we have had with offering formation in a multicultural community is integral to our Society's charism and key to our missionary calling, yet it is becoming common for many communities. We certainly do not have the final word; that will never be written. We do, however, offer these thoughts as "discussion starters" — for our own continued dialogue, and perhaps for other communities.

The authors: Adam MacDonald, from Michigan, graduated from Divine Word College, Epworth in 1993. He is a novice. Son Van Nguyen is also a novice who graduated from Divine Word College. Sonny came to the United States from Vietnam in 1975. Carlos Paniagua is originally from Mexico, but joined the Society in the United States. He graduated from Divine Word College in 1993 and is a novice. Ed Peklo is from Omaha and was on the formation and instructional staff at Divine

Word College. Ed is currently director of novices for the three SVD provinces. Dennis Newton, from Iowa, lives and works at Divine Word College. He is director of admissions and recruitment. Paul Wang, from the People's Republic of China, studied ESL at Divine Word and is currently a novice.

*Reprinted with permission from
HORIZON, Summer, 1994*